

Peter was beaten to death at a busy village pub, witnesses

WHEN a peace-loving father is battered to death at a busy village pub, witnesses are usually not hard to find.

But Cheryl Stone fears the thugs who murdered her husband Peter will never be brought to justice – because the bar where he was attacked was full of travellers who all claim to have seen nothing. Extensive

By Alistair Self

enquiries by detectives into the savage death of postman Peter have been met by an impenetrable wall of silence.

Frustrated officers have told Cheryl they know who killed Peter but they are powerless to bring charges because of lack of evidence. Peter, 37,

was set on outside the Chequers in Cottenham, Cambridgeshire – a once-secluded village that has been traumatised by an invasion of hundreds of Irish travellers.

Cheryl told yesterday how large numbers of the travellers were drinking in the Chequers the night Peter died.

She said: 'The police think they know who killed Peter but they can't prove it because no one will talk. I don't know that we shall ever find out because of the nature of these people. The only people in the pub were travellers, but as soon as it happened they just scattered.'

'We just can't cope with it as a village. They drive around at high speed at night in their fast cars ignoring the law. They are taking over through sheer numbers.'

'It was bad enough losing my husband and explaining what happened to our children, but the coroner can't complete the inquest and I can't get justice unless we find out who did this. I am devastated.'

'I had phoned Peter just after midnight at the pub to see how he had been getting on. He said that he had been talking to some of the travellers about integrating with the local community, but I never saw him again until he lay dying in hospital.'

The murder of Peter – father of Jack, nine, and six-year-old Molly – was the violent culmination of months of intimidation and threats that began in February last year with the arrival of hundreds of Irish travellers.

Hundreds more arrived at Easter after the first wave secured land called Smithy Fen. They want to buy up surrounding farmland that could become home to about 8,000 travellers.

A huge haul of smuggled cigarettes found at the site has been confiscated by police, sparking fears that the travellers are cultivating an industry in smuggled booze and tobacco.

There is also growing speculation that they are involved in smuggling illegal immigrants through ports on the east coast of England to supply the demand for cheap agricultural labour.

Over the summer, the countryside around Cottenham was turned into a rubbish tip strewn with old sofas and

burned-out cars. The village, which has a population of 6,000, has also endured a spate of burglaries.

Locals claim that more than 800 incidents involving the travellers have been reported to police, with no action taken. Last week, 1,000 residents pledged to withhold council tax until the local authority sorts out the problem.

The Chequers, close to the village war memorial, was a peaceful family inn before the travellers arrived.

Mr Stone believed his job as postman would make it easier to build bridges with them and help sort out some of the problems.

But he was beaten up in the early hours of November 29 after trying to help landlord James Hutchison clear the pub of travellers, who had refused to leave after closing time. He was rushed to hospital in a coma but died of severe head injuries two days later.

Mrs Stone said: 'It was a friendly local, a really nice village pub until about August last year when James let the travellers in, and then none of the locals would go in.'

'The travellers intimidated everyone.'

Mr Hutchison, who needed surgery to reconstruct his face after being beaten up by travellers some years ago, was so shaken that police put him in a safe house for his own protection.

Terry Brownbill, leader of the Cottenham residents' protest group said: 'The murder of Peter Stone was the last straw. We now have 1,000 people who are refusing to pay council tax until something is done. That is half the households in the village, and the revolt is growing fast. People have had enough after a year of violence and intimidation.'

Mr Brownbill said women in the village are frightened to go out at night. Local children have been forced to school buses by travellers' children and stones have been thrown at cars. 'The police have tried to help but they are swamped by the problem, he said.

'The problems started when a caravan of travellers who had lived on the site for 40 years was on its way to

invade the village.'

The Siege of Cottenham

The widow of a postman murdered in a village invaded by caravans fears she will never get justice

Sometimes more than 100 would get in there. They were aggressive and everyone else was driven out. They played up with James and wouldn't go home at last orders.

'Peter was a peacemaker. He was trying to help the travellers to integrate into the community but now he is dead.'

Despite a huge police inquiry, not one of the travellers in the pub that night admitted seeing what happened.

Five men were arrested – four of them while boarding a ferry for Ireland at Swansea, 200 miles from Cottenham – but all were allowed bail after police came up against a wall of silence.

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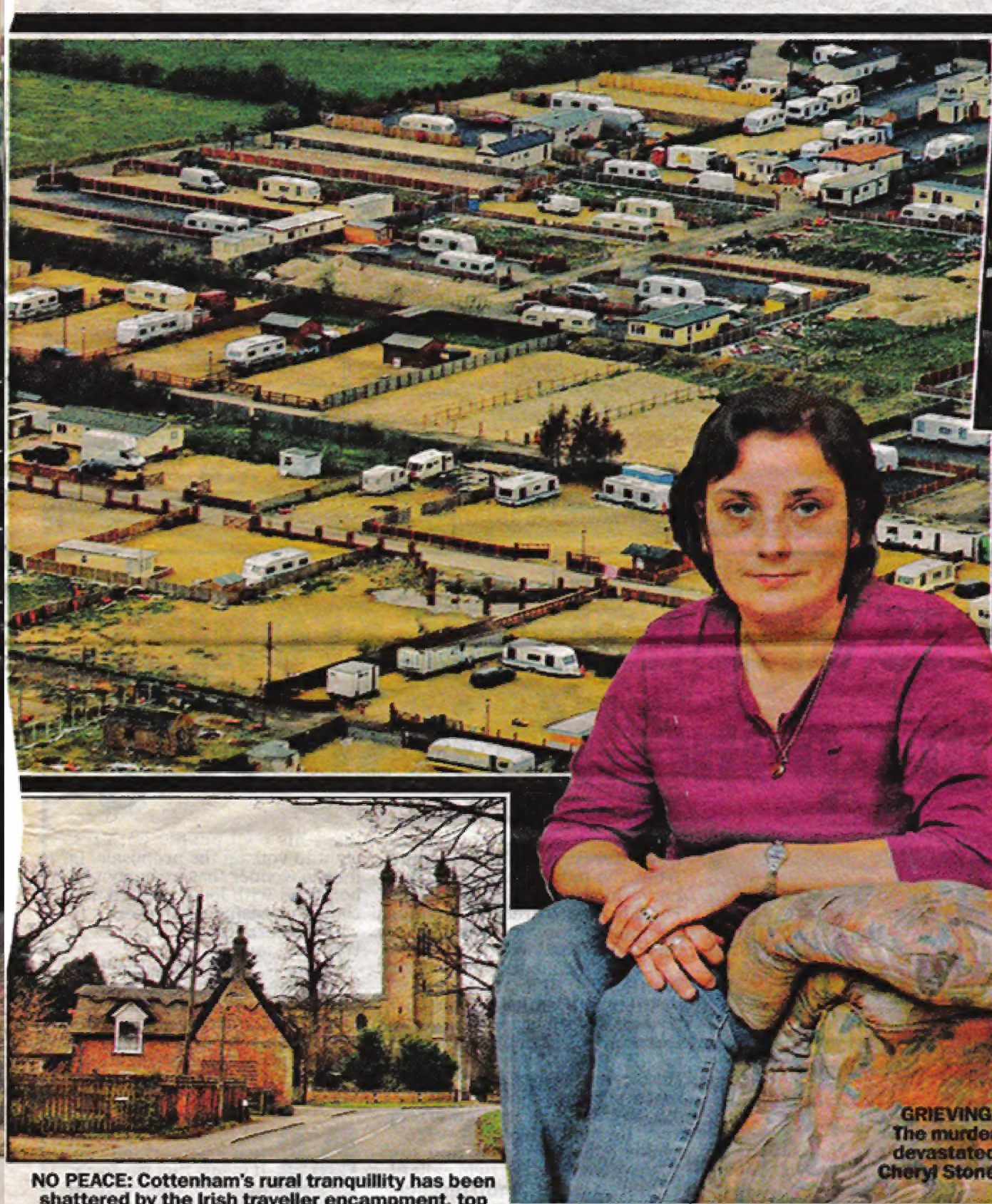
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NO PEACE: Cottenham's rural tranquillity has been shattered by the Irish traveller encampment, top

GRIEVING: The murder devastated Cheryl Stone



MEMORY: Peter and Cheryl Stone on their wedding day ten years ago

way. The English travellers put bales of straw and trailers across the access roads to their site, but overnight the new arrivals forced their way in and drove out the occupants.

'It was a siege, just like a war zone. Hundreds more travellers arrived from Ireland. They have bought up land around the original site and are putting pressure on local farmers to sell more land.'

'They are not traditional travellers. They are young, wear expensive jewellery and designer clothes and drive new Mercedes and BMW cars.'

'They sell the land to other travellers from Ireland and even build permanent homes without planning permission.'

'If they get all the land they are trying to buy there will be 8,000 travellers here within a couple of years, outnumbering the 6,000 villagers. They are taking over.'

Rick Bristow, chairman of the Smithy Fen residents' association, whose £500,000 four-bedroom home is opposite the encampment, said: 'We are law-abiding citizens.'

'Our children will be at risk if we talk'

We will put the council tax we don't pay to one side. We will pay it when the authorities protect us properly.'

The English travellers who were driven off the site now live huddled in fear a few miles away, but are too frightened to talk about the invasion.

One said: 'If we talk our children will be at risk. Who will protect us?'

South Cambridgeshire District Council's planning portfolio holder Councillor David Bard said the

authority sympathised with the villagers but its hands were tied. 'We refused planning permission for the developments that are going on, but when the travellers appealed, the appeals authority said the developments would go ahead because human rights legislation favoured the travellers.'

Council leader Daphne Spink wrote to Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott in January asking for help but has not received a reply.

Chief Superintendent John Raine of Cambridgeshire Police said that extra officers had been moved into the village.

'We arrested five men after the murder of Peter Stone,' he added, 'and our inquiries are continuing. We are confident that our inquiries will eventually reach a satisfactory conclusion.'

Cheryl Stone and the villagers of Cottenham are not so sure.